

EVERYTHING IS AN ARGUMENT: A POETRY COLLECTION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is comprised of thirty-three poems that I have written over the last year. All are lyrical and most are written in free verse, although there are a few traditional forms as well. The poems treat a range of topics and have been arranged accordingly under four broad categories: The Social, The Spiritual, The Natural, and Poetics. These four categories represent the main themes explored in the collection and serve to unify the poems according to topic. However, nearly every poem echoes, either in imagery or in ideas, the dominant themes from one or more of the three categories to which it does not belong, and these linkages are as integral to the overall structure of the work as its divisions. Titled “Everything is an Argument,” this thesis explores the emotional and intellectual stances we take in response to our experiences and surroundings. At the same time, it seeks to reflect that the boundaries between our critical categories are permeable, and that the way we understand the world in one respect is intrinsically linked to the way we encounter it in other areas. Furthermore, what the things are that we encounter are as fluid as our understanding of them, and while our labels are useful, even important in certain ways, they need not be absolutely delimiting.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I began this project with very little knowledge of poetry, for although I had studied it during my years as an undergraduate, I knew almost nothing of the conjurer's art, of the way in which the best poets infuse their verse with that vibrant, ethereal quality that is the heart of a good poem. And it was to the secrets of that magic that I was drawn, to the ways in which language could be so finely tuned as to breathe the breath of thing it sought to communicate. I began to write, then, as a new convert begins to explore the depths of a new-found grace. I have learned much, and sometimes even stumbled upon the ridge where language slips over into that wild, roaring place beyond itself. I am pleased with these moments; of the others I can say I have learned from the error, and will try to continue writing in spite of them.

I have always thought that the art of literature is, at its heart, about the exploration and expression of the meaningfulness, or lack thereof, that we discern in our lives and the world around us. And poetry too is, in this sense, a means of argument, a kind of discourse that attempts to translate the world according to a particular way of viewing it. At the same time, however, poetry approaches argument with a particular style. As Emily Dickinson once quipped, poetry should "tell the truth but tell it slant," and like the languages of the mystics and of humour, but unlike academic discourse, poetry seldom benefits from naming its subject too directly. Rather than by setting out a linear series of propositions and conclusions, therefore, poetry sustains meaning by creating an interconnected web of statements and images that are evocative precisely because they establish and hold tensions between them.

I think that creating such tension is one of the greatest challenges in poetry, and when I look back over the last two years, I can see that it is related to my single greatest struggle in this project, which has been the search for my own poetic voice. While academic study had helped me to develop a strong critical style, I found that its characteristic moves and intuitions did not translate easily into poetry. There was something too linear, too propositional, in the tone, and for a long while it was necessary to restrain this tendency towards the statement of fact as such in order that I might explore a more enchanted way of speaking. As a discipline this was essential, yet it too had a way of stunting the work, of keeping me from writing with the wide-open vulnerability that allows the soul to inhabit the text, and speak there with sincerity.

It is in the pieces most recently written that I can see this division within myself has begun to heal. In editing older work I tried to apply this balance to it, to let go the anxiety over saying either too much or not enough and allow the language to move both naturally and with purpose. I do not like poetry that is opaque or ambiguous to a fault, and so I feel responsible to try and say something and mean it too. At the same time I have come to see that the communicative force of poetry is akin to the sermon rather than the lecture; the latter is the dissemination of information, but the former is a matter of "doing the text" to the reader, and it is here that the freedom and surprising purity of poetic language is efficacious.

It has been in tandem with my struggle to create meaning in my work that I grappled too with rhythm and sound. I am in love with the tumbling grace of traditional meters, but in many circles it has long been thought that these are the mark of an outmoded and even naïve approach to poetic discourse. Consequently, I found it necessary to write a great deal in free verse, in order that I might discover a voice that could be taken seriously when translated into metrics. At the same time, I have begun to study the technical features of meter and other prosodic elements as they have developed and sometimes been abandoned over the course of the English poetic tradition, and this study has affirmed in me a sense of the value and legitimacy of many features of traditional verse.

My exploration of meter and sound has connected directly to the themes and ideas that I explore in my poems. In an essay called *Body Music: Notes on Rhythm in Poetry*, Dennis Lee argues that prosody is a matter of what he calls “kinesthetic knowing” (20), or the attempt to “recreate the cadence of how things are” (19). This, he argues, is a matter of “syncopation,” and in traditional measured poetry it involved “counterpointing the flux of spoken stresses against the regular metrical beat, so that they kept dancing in and out of phase in the reader’s body sense” (28). In other words, “truth in rhythm” for traditional English poetry involved creating tension by “orchestrating” (30) the regular, fixed rhythm of the meter with the flux that is evident in the particular, everyday experiences of language and the world.

Further, this use of rhythm “meshed” with a sense of the world’s coherence that Lee argues persisted in Europe at the time; as he puts it, this sense was “that things were free to be themselves within the natural law established by God” (31). Lee goes on to argue, however, that that centre increasingly ceased to hold in the world view of more and more poets, and so many began to search for a new prosodic language to express their sense of a new order. This search culminated ultimately in free verse, a term that Lee defines as a “new prosody . . . which Ezra Pound developed between 1912 and 1920” (34). Unlike traditional verse, this new prosody syncopates syntax with notation, so that syntax and its rhythms are played against elements such as line breaks, margins, and white space. The way that syntax and notation are played against one another controls for two things, pacing and emphasis, and the “kinesthetic knowing” that they express reflects a “polyvalent and relative” sense of order in the world, where coherence is no longer absolute but “local, provisional, and contingent in the flux” (41).

Lee’s assessment fits well with my assertion that poems are essentially arguments, even in so far as their form embodies the worldview of a particular phase in tradition. The trouble is that, in my world-view, the centre has not ceased to hold. And although I conceive of that centre as being more mysterious than was probably in the minds of my predecessors, the problem still remains: how to use prosody to express my own sense of the continuity in poetic tradition and the world, while also taking into account what I see as valuable insights and tools developed by more contemporary poets? Ultimately, while I have enjoyed the experiments mentioned above, the tendency in me towards tradition is strong, and my favorite poem in the collection has the most rigid metrical structure of them all. It is also the most directive, but that is balanced, I think, by what I have discovered of imagery and emotive force.

The themes I explore in this work are those dearest to me. I have sought to capture the experiences and insights of the moment, as I believe this is the great power of lyrical verse, and I found as the project unfolded that I was writing the many points of a sort of interconnected web of ideas that illuminated one another. This linkage is more evident with some pieces than others, but I think it is true of all of them, and it is certainly true of my discovery of myself as a writer and as a person living in this place, in this world, right now.

For Jacob and Edanna
and Carmen

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